



Oxfordshire Breastfeeding Support



2021 OBS Impact Report

Assessing Virtual Services

May 2021



"They're solely the reason I have remained breastfeeding for so long. I couldn't have done it if it wasn't for them. So many people gave me bad advice and I'd go to this team and they were amazing!" – Shannon

Oxfordshire Breastfeeding Support (OBS) carries out a yearly impact assessment to find out our users' experiences, give the opportunity for feedback and learn how we might serve the Oxfordshire community better. Each year we focus on one particular topic to look at in more depth. In 2021 we focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the virtual services enforced by the Covid-19 pandemic, and our users' thoughts on planning a return to physical services.

"I missed the human hug when I needed it more" – Veronika



METHOD

A questionnaire was created by OBS trustees and facilitators, with input and testing from users and other volunteers. The questionnaire was sent by email to every service user who had registered for any OBS virtual service from March 2020, including those who did not attend for their appointment/group. The questionnaire was also promoted on the OBS Facebook group.



There were **209 responses (nearly 20% of our 2020 service users)**.

- 199 responses were from direct service users, 9 from partners and one from the friend of a service user.
- The age range, deprivation level and ethnic background of the respondents were similar to those of our service users in 2020 - this showed the potential of this method of questionnaire delivery to bring in the opinions of a representative sample of our users.
- **5%** of respondents were under 30 years of age and **14%** were from minority ethnic groups, or of mixed/multiple ethnic origin.
- There were more respondents from Oxford city (**53%**) than our 2020 service users (**44%**).



GENERAL

Overall, respondents were extremely positive about their experience with OBS.

- **93%** felt that OBS helped them understand more about feeding their baby. **87%** said that OBS made them feel more confident that they could feed their baby in a way that worked for them. Despite the challenge of the virtual environment, **31%** felt more connected to other parents through using OBS services. In our pre-pandemic impact analysis, the figure was **43%**.

“It was fantastic, I felt heard and supported in such a wonderful way. There was no judgement.”

- **90%** of family and friend respondents reported that OBS helped them understand more about feeding and **70%** said that OBS increased their confidence to support their family member or friend.

“It was amazingly helpful and reassuring. I felt listened to and supported in an entirely judgement free way. I appreciated the clear pragmatic guidance we received.”

- **86%** of respondents said that they were able to feed in the way that they wanted to, although some specified that they had to overcome difficulties to do so.

“

Extremely grateful for this wonderful well organised helpful service. We are lucky to have it.

AMISHA PATEL

“

It was amazing, my mind was blown, I cannot thank you enough for your support and insight!

SUSIE

“

Excellent non judgemental support at such a difficult and isolating time, thank you

ANTENATAL VIRTUAL GROUP

40 people had been to an antenatal session and **100% felt welcome** there. **70%** of those who had since given birth felt the session had helped them to deal with breastfeeding problems, with an additional **5%** saying they didn't experience any problems.

"It was so helpful to have help antenatally to prepare for what may have been a difficult feeding journey" - JS

VIRTUAL 1:1 SESSIONS

154 people had been to a virtual 1:1 session:

- **76%** felt that the 1:1 session helped them to resolve their problem
- A further **14%** felt that it partially helped them.
- **95%** were satisfied with the support they received.

Weaknesses of virtual 1:1 sessions included difficulties with showing the facilitator the baby's positioning and attachment, particularly if the service user was alone, and inability to assess the baby for presence of a tongue-tie.

“

I was very happy with the advice I received during my two 1:1s. It was such a relief to be able to access the support and the consultants seemed very knowledgeable.

STEF JEWITT

“

Such a useful service! Only wish face to face had been available as I imagine would have been even more helpful

“

The calls made the difference between me stopping breastfeeding and continuing. Without doubt, I would have bottle fed if it had not been for the advice and support we were given. This has also been the only service that provided us support and reassurance about night wakings.

E. PARKER

VIRTUAL GROUPS

91 people had been to a virtual group.

- **96%** felt welcome there.
- The most common thing that people found useful about group sessions was feeding help from facilitators - **73%** reported this.
- **40-50%** of respondents said that social support from volunteers, breakout rooms on a particular topic and contact with other parents were useful.

“

It was great to come and ask questions online but also have the opportunity to see other mums and feeding when we hadn't been out and met anyone and it was very lonely at times

“

Fantastically run supportive sessions. A lockdown lifeline

“

So kind and so much empathy. Made me feel understood and cared for.

Limitations of groups included:

- The awkwardness of interacting on a virtual platform
- Discomfort with feeding in that setting
- Difficulties with not knowing who was able to see and hear group activities if a service user had their camera off.

“Very grateful for how welcoming it was, and for the fact that volunteers remembered me from one week to the next. Unlike the consultation which I think was extremely effective online (though we didn't discuss latch issues) I do feel the connection with other parents would have been better and likely longer lasting in person, and to a lesser extent the help I got from facilitators about latching would likely have been more valuable had we been face to face and had they been able to see me feed.”



Users made suggestions for improvement, such as:

- Signposting the different functions of the groups better, including social support and breakout rooms.
- Changes to ensure that those wanting direct feeding help received equitable time from the facilitators.



FACEBOOK GROUP

164 people had used the Facebook group in the past year.

- **94%** found it helpful.

“The group has felt incredibly supportive, it has really made feel not alone in tricky moments.”

- Three quarters of respondents found searching existing threads or reading information threads the most useful features of the Facebook group. **46%** found it useful to post their own question and **35%** found it useful to comment on other people’s posts.

“I love the engagement posts with the general questions about breastfeeding and parenting where users are asked a question to answer. I really enjoy reading people's answers and I think it builds engagement with people who may not otherwise comment much.” - SJ

Some users felt uncomfortable in the Facebook group, feeling that various viewpoints were promoted and that this could lead to people feeling guilty (for example in relation to use of bottles or sleep training). There were also divided views about the use of inclusive language, although the majority of those who commented were keen to increase and validate OBS’ choice to use inclusive language such as breastfeeding or chestfeeding.



STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF VIRTUAL SERVICES

81% found it very straightforward to get support from OBS when they needed it. Several people noted how much they appreciated the service at the start of the pandemic when there was nothing else available.

“You saved me at a very difficult time, when no one else seemed to be there.”

Just under half of respondents found online support sufficient for their needs whereas **14% felt they really needed face-to-face support.**

“

I couldn't have done it without my husband who held the iPad for me...it might be difficult for people who don't have someone to help them during the online consultation.

“

Brilliant. I was worried it wouldn't be too helpful not seeing someone in person but the zoom call really helped and gave support just when I needed it.

“

In the mental space I was in, I found online communication difficult and I found it particularly hard when I couldn't see anyone in person without having to get laptop out etc

When asked about barriers to using virtual services, **11%** of people said they did not like using Zoom. Less than **5%** reported other difficulties - specifically **2%** said they did not have access to the right technology, **1%** reported disability or communication barriers and **0.5%** said they did not have enough data/WiFi access. Some respondents felt that OBS could be doing more to provide physical drop ins despite pandemic restrictions.

“Everything being online made me feel even more isolated - I think having in person support is invaluable for new parents... Not even having a support group to go to to get help with latching etc was a really horrible experience for me. I truly believe that offering in person support is absolutely necessary for breastfeeding and feasible with proper PPE and booking appointments in advance. Zoom is not a substitute for in person breastfeeding support.”



72% of respondents wanted OBS to continue virtual 1:1 services even after physical drop ins are possible and **37%** wanted virtual groups to continue.

In terms of preference:

- **67%** of respondents would use a physical drop in as their first choice if they needed feeding help tomorrow.
- 1:1 virtual support was the second priority, Zoom group the third and Facebook group the fourth choice.

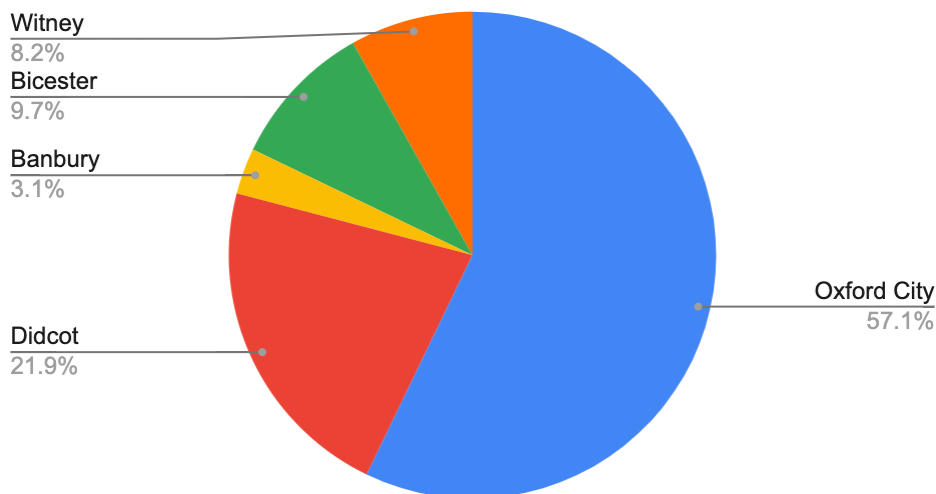
“When face to face can resume the option of some online support and groups would be helpful for those struggling to get out or without transport and those with social anxiety.” - Helen



PLANNING A RETURN TO PHYSICAL SERVICES

Oxford City was the most convenient drop in location for respondents, with Didcot a significant second place.

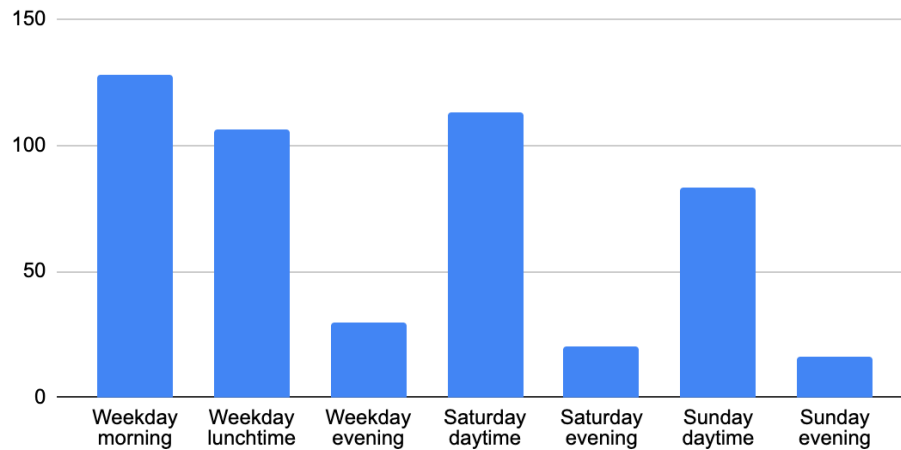
Most convenient drop in location





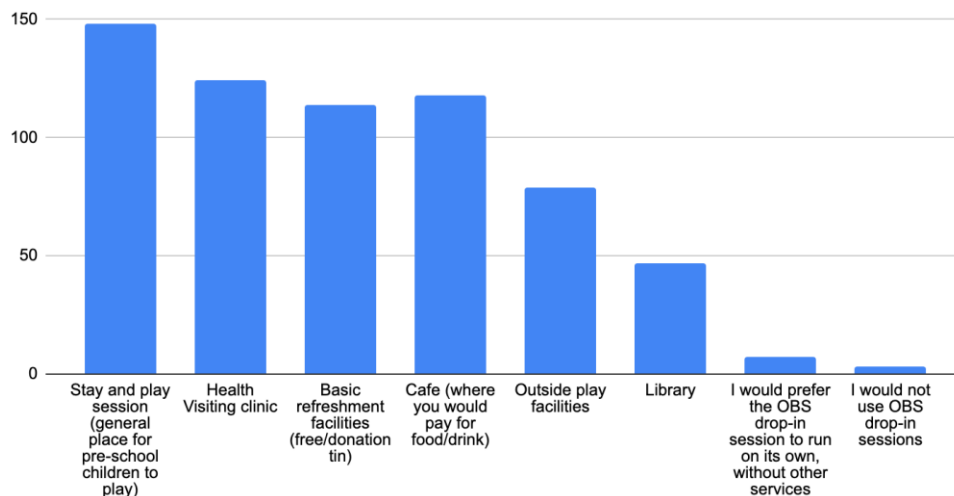
In terms of timing, **64%** of respondents said they would like drop ins on a weekday morning, and **53%** on a weekday lunchtime. 57% would like Saturday daytime and **42%** Sunday daytime. **15%** or less would like evening services.

When OBS can open drop-in groups in person, which days/times would you be likely to use? (multiple options)



In terms of parallel facilities, **74%** of respondents would like a stay and play running alongside OBS drop ins, **62%** would like health visiting clinic, **59%** a cafe (where you pay), **57%** basic refreshments (where you donate) and **40%** outside play facilities:

What other services would you like to have running alongside an OBS drop-in session, when they can restart? (multiple options)





INCREASING EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

In order to increase EDI within OBS, users suggested:

- Increasing representation among facilitators and volunteers
- Having champions from various communities
- Connecting with Oxfordshire charities and groups working with minorities
- Offering services such as translated materials and consultations in different languages or with captioning

Several respondents noted that they were from ethnic minority groups and felt very welcome at OBS.



CONCLUSION

We were able to get feedback from a representative sample of OBS users. Indeed, and because of the virtual model, we were more able than usual to give people who might not have enjoyed their experience - and even those who did not attend after booking - a chance to respond.

OBS maintained its high standards of service during 2020 and virtual working, with more than **90%** feeling welcome, satisfied and happy to recommend our services to friends and family. Although they were clearly inferior to physical drop ins for social contact, OBS groups also played an important role in helping families feel connected to each other for a significant minority of people. Virtual groups were most valued for the opportunity to get direct breastfeeding support from a facilitator. This is important to know as they are a more efficient service model for deliver feeding support than virtual 1:1 sessions.

Respondents were also very positive about using information threads and searching previous threads on Facebook as a means of getting useful advice - these had been promoted due to the significant expansion of the Facebook group during 2020.

Although virtual working was an unavoidable response to the pandemic, nearly half of respondents felt that it had been sufficient for their needs and over 70% wanted OBS to continue to offer virtual

options in the future, particularly 1:1 sessions. However physical drop ins were still the clear priority if users had to choose one option and the importance of opening physical drop ins as soon as possible was emphasised by many in their comments. OBS will need to carefully consider the resources available to continue virtual support alongside physical drop ins and how to triage or ration this.

Nearly two thirds of respondents felt that Oxford City was the appropriate place for drop ins (although there was a slight over-representation of City users in the sample compared to OBS' general service users in 2020) - many people commented that parking and bus services were very important whatever the location. Demand for other locations was divided between the South, North and West of the county. Several people mentioned Abingdon as another useful location but this is covered by Abingdon baby cafes so would not be a sensible use of OBS resources. Kidlington and Wallingford were mentioned several times. Overall the responses support OBS' previous geographical plans to strengthen Didcot and introduce Banbury drop in services, while maintaining several Oxford City drop ins. Bicester was also chosen as convenient for a significant minority, and Kidlington could give a balance of centrality and accessibility.

Respondents were generally in favour of weekday morning and lunchtime drop ins, which was the model predominantly used by OBS previously. There was significant demand for weekend services, with Saturday more popular than Sunday, but little demand for evening services. The majority wanted other services to run alongside OBS, particularly 'stay and play', health visiting and the availability of refreshments, which could be basic or in the form of a commercial cafe.

The freetext comments were a rich source of inspiration and also food for thought for improvements. OBS will work to streamline the registration process and improve communication about the way that OBS groups work. There is more work to be done to advertise the service through midwives and health visitors, and to continue working in partnership with the infant feeding team at the breastfeeding clinics.